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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LILONGWE 000044

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [MI](#)
SUBJECT: MALAWI: PRIMARIES DO MORE HARM THAN GOOD

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Classified By: Ambassador Peter Bodde for Reasons 1.4 (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Malawi's recently concluded primary season was marred by procedural problems and disputed outcomes. None of the three major parties had transparent or consistent rules for conducting primaries, and none were immune from vote-buying and outright imposition of candidates. In the North, sources told emboff that President Mutharika himself resorted to intimidation to ensure his friend Peter Mwanza won the Mzuzu City primary. As in 2004, manipulated primaries will increase the likelihood that independents -- including many losers of major party primaries -- will go on to victory in general elections. If they do, no one party is likely to gain a majority of seats in parliament and the stature of Malawi's political parties may suffer the consequences. End Summary.

Rigged Processes Lead to Poor Outcomes

¶2. (SBU) While all three major parties, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), Malawi Congress Party (MCP), and United Democratic Front (UDF), claimed their recent primaries were evidence of internal democracy in Malawi, none distinguished themselves. The primary season, which lasted from October to December, was marred by procedural problems, personal attacks, and disputed outcomes. The typical primary had no voting or ballots. Rather, party officials literally blindfolded each candidate in a large field. Eligible primary voters then lined up behind their candidate of choice. The candidate with the longest line behind him or her was declared the winner. Once all voters were in place, officials unblindfolded each candidate so they could see not only their level of support, but also those who actually supported them. Emboffs observed this process at the former MCP headquarters building located next to the embassy. This lack of secret balloting led candidates to openly entice voters with cash, fertilizer, or other inducements to elicit support. One DPP primary candidate in Karonga told emboff how the eventual winner was handing out cash just minutes before the primary started.

¶3. (U) Due to stigma from the days of the one-party state, no political party in Malawi issues membership cards. Membership rolls, even for party officials, are spotty, if they exist at all. Instead, local party organizations rely on "known" members to vouch for others as being party supporters. In many cases, the candidates themselves attempted to be the arbiters of who was truly a party member in an attempt to tilt the primary in their favor. Moreover, the largely volunteer local party organizations have grown

organically over the years. This has led to disputes over the actual number of area committees that exist in a particular constituency. These problems were most prevalent among the DPP, the youngest of the major parties. Most DPP candidates came from other parties and brought their existing political supporters with them, who often clashed with the DPP's newly-created area committees.

High-Level Interference Common

¶4. (SBU) In all three major parties, national council members and regional governors, the individuals responsible for planning and executing the primaries, were also parliamentary candidates. This inherent conflict of interest was ignored. Former President Bakili Muluzi, meanwhile, announced the UDF would not hold primaries in constituencies where the party had incumbent legislators. He justified the decision as a way to reward party loyalists who did not cross the floor to join Mutharika's DPP when Mutharika left the UDF in 2005.

¶5. (C) In the case of the DPP Mzuzu City primary, former Mzuzu University Vice Chancellor Peter Mwanza, a close friend of President Mutharika, appeared to win a well-organized primary in a landslide. However, Mzuzu residents told emboff that a popular local businessman who owns a prominent taxi company was forced to withdraw from the race. Chinula was reportedly visited by President Mutharika himself, along with the Minister of Finance Goodall Gondwe, and DPP Northern Region Governor Harry Mkandawire. The trio told Chinula not to run so that Mwanza could win the primary. When Chinula protested that he had already spent over \$40,000 USD of his own money campaigning, the trio reportedly threatened him with violence if he did compete, even as an independent in the general elections.

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¶6. (SBU) Closeness to Mutharika did not guarantee victory in all cases. In the Southern region, two high profile DPP primaries drew extensive media attention. In Mwanza Central, Minister of Labor Davies Katsonga took on Special Advisor to the President on National Unity Nicholas Dausi while in Blantyre City East DPP Deputy Secretary General Francis Mphepo challenged Deputy Minister of Information John Bande. Both Dausi and Mphepo, emboldened by their high ranking appointments by Mutharika, initially believed they were assured of victory. However, popular support remained behind the incumbents. Mphepo eventually withdrew the day before the primary. Dausi argued repeatedly about the electoral process and then refused to be blindfolded in what turned into a landslide for Katsonga. Other high profile losses in DPP primaries included one cabinet minister and six deputy ministers.

Disputes Pushed Aside

¶7. (SBU) All three parties received numerous complaints from candidates and constituents about the conduct of the primaries, but all fell on deaf ears. During a UDF governing council meeting, Muluzi silenced debate on primary disputes and reiterated his decree that there would be no primaries for incumbents. He went further, selecting the replacement for a deceased candidate rather than running new primaries. The DPP attempted to secure pledges from all of its candidates that they would not run as independents in the general elections if they lost their primary. Most losers told the press they would not be bound by the pledge, however. Despite continuing disputes, the DPP declared its candidate list final and released it on January 15, two days before the party's convention.

Good News for Independents

18. (SBU) Comment: When Malawi's large parties fail to select the most popular candidate for Parliament, those who know they are genuinely popular run as independent candidates, and often win the general elections. In 2004, rigged primaries were a major reason why independents ultimately took over 20% of the National Assembly's seats. Poorly-run primaries, combined with the fact that most of its incumbents originally come from other parties, make the DPP particularly vulnerable in many parliamentary races. Allowing a true secret ballot and maintaining registers of local area committee members would improve the party primary process in Malawi, as well as the health of the country's democracy, but the main political leaders still appear unwilling to relinquish the top-down control of their organizations. The recent primaries highlighted the need for programs in Malawi by international NGOs that have experience in training and building capacity in political parties.

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